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Meeting children's needs for care and protection: Programme summary (Short report)

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Meeting Children's Needs for Care and Protection

Programme summary

Understanding how effective and efficient are public services in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations is a goal common to a range of professions and services. Yet, despite widespread commitment to and investment in evaluating effectiveness and efficiency, we know little about the impact of every day multi-professional responses, that is 'service as usual', to children and young people in need of protection.

The Insight Institute supported and hosted a series of workshops that drew together national and international knowledge and professional, policy and research expertise. It comprised two linked elements. The first focused on the issues involved in using administrative data routinely collected on children safeguarded in the community to better inform planning, service delivery and evaluative research. The second focused on the methodological, contextual and process issues inherent to designing longitudinal studies that explore the complex and multi-dimensional nature of intervention.

Collection and use of routine data

A starting point was that while data sharing between agencies, or a lack of it, has attracted high profile attention, routine data collection requires comparable and co-ordinated attention. Multiple factors influence what data is recorded and retained, and how it is collated. Single agencies record data for different purposes, such as case management, operational planning and for national statistical returns. Software, and its lack of adaptability or the cost of adapting it, has an influence on what is collected, how it is collected and what use is made of it. Over the seminars there was consensus that a wealth of data is collected but that it is not used as much as it could be - within single agencies or between agencies – at either local or national levels. That data is not used to its full potential can have a demoralising effect as the burden of recording appears

to be disproportionate to the return. This in turn can influence the level of commitment to accuracy and consistency in data recording.

There are differences between, and diversity within, local authorities, health boards and police forces in their approaches to data recording, management and use. It is not evident that there is a sufficiently shared sense of ownership and understanding of the value of data for learning about the effectiveness and efficiency of services. Contributors noted developments and the progress towards better data management within health agencies and the police forces and highlighted a need for a cultural shift within local authorities in particular. National projects and central government were identified as important players in promoting consistency of data collection within single disciplines.

National data definitions may be a way to promote consistency and guide data recording across agencies and across geographical areas. Examples were shared of agreed minimum datasets and 'data dictionaries' that operate on a statutory basis across all services. A mandatory requirement for specific data, that is clearly defined, was identified as enabling. Increasing the use of common unique identifiers across services offers considerable potential for the sharing of information for casework purposes as well as for linking anonymised data for evaluative research purposes. Link data about children and families from across services offers an opportunity to build a more holistic picture of children's development and of service provision. Contributors offered perspectives on technical, ethical and legal issues that highlighted the possibilities for linking data from different services and with data from other sources (e.g. primary research).

Longitudinal research

It was clear from the programme that there are some research questions that cannot be answered with routinely collected administrative data alone.

Sometimes it will be necessary to supplement it with additional data collection, especially about the qualitative aspects of service provision.

Longitudinal research is required to track the journey of vulnerable children through formal systems of support and protection, explore short-term and longer-term outcomes and evaluate the efficacy of everyday multi-professional intervention aimed at improving children's lives. The programme drew out a range of ethical, methodological and practical insights that can be used for informing the development of a study.

There are core constituents that need to be considered in designing a longitudinal survey of this vulnerable population of children. These include a sampling and collection strategy: which data to collect, on whom, and when the data should be gathered. Decisions on depth (multi-method, intensive data collection) versus breadth (sample size and representativeness) of data collection are required. Resources (costs) as well as methodological considerations will influence these decisions. A robust analytic and statistical package needs to be incorporated into the research design from the outset. A minimum of three sweeps is generally required for a study to be classed as longitudinal. Defining the central question to be addressed by a longitudinal study is the starting point.

During the course of the seminars we heard examples of what can be achieved in data linkage and in longitudinal design. Based on the presentations and discussion we are convinced that longitudinal tracking of the effectiveness of service provision to vulnerable children over the longer term for both research and operational purposes will be greatly facilitated by better use of existing routinely collected data, better linkage of different datasets relating to different aspects of well-being, greater commonality of data fields collected across all local authorities and the establishment of a national minimum dataset.

We are also convinced that there is now sufficient evidence from existing national and international models of governance, data linkage and longitudinal design upon which to build an effective model for Scotland. It is clear that a minimum dataset would not provide the evidence required to answer all the

questions that might be asked in longitudinal research. However, if existing data can be used more effectively, research designs can then focus on what additional information is needed in relation to specific research and evaluation questions. Indeed, during the seminars there the view that it was a moral imperative to use data better was expressed.

Next steps

It was evident from the seminars that there is a considerable amount of activity being undertaken in relation to both data management and longitudinal surveys. Some of these activities are linked and cross-referenced, but some appear to be operating in parallel. During the course of the seminars we identified key data repositories, projects and activities of relevance to the aims of the programme, some generic and some child-specific. In our view, any further developments in relation to the specific needs of vulnerable children should be embedded within these wider initiatives; however, it is our observation that placing a sharp focus on the needs of children can help to explain the *point* of making better use of data. Whilst there is merit in developing projects at local level there was a clear view that there is also a need for a national approach. A full report of discussions with recommendations for specific actions by different parties can be found at:

<http://bit.ly/rTtpaE>

The team who designed this series of workshops was:

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For further information on the Scottish Universities Insight Institute please visit: www.scottishinsight.ac.uk, contacting Insight staff using the details provided there.